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Making Men in Ghana

By Stephan F. Miescher. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005. ISBN: 978-0253217868

In his *Making Men in Ghana*, historian Stephan F. Miescher uses the self-told life histories of eight senior men in the Kwawu region of Ghana to discuss how ideas of masculinity are created, interpreted, and negotiated. Developed from his dissertation, *Making Men in Ghana* probes the way in which gender, in the form of masculinity, functions in the lives of *cis*, straight men. In particular, this is an analysis of gender in elder men, who have achieved prominence, stature, and respect within their communities. Through the stories of eight senior men including a Reverend, a retired teacher, a religious elder, and a policeman, Miescher seeks to explore “the complex processes of how a group of men negotiated with different and often competing notions of masculinities” (2).

Making Men in Ghana is organized into an introduction and five main chapters, each of which explores a different stage of life of these men, from childhood to marriage to elderdom. While these chapters are mainly based around interviews Miescher conducted with his informants, they also draw upon a sizable amount of archival data, primarily from the Ghana National Archives, the Kwawu Traditional Council archives, and church archives. While this certainly makes for a much more dynamic and informative history than monographs of an earlier generation that felt it necessary to choose between oral and archival sources, Miescher’s methods are still fairly conventional by contemporary standards. For example, Luise White, a fellow Africanist and a cited influence of Miescher, eschewed the idea of discrete informants in favor of

creating a compiled oral archive upon which her book *Speaking with Vampires* was based.¹ Still, Miescher situates himself within the oral historiography, emphasizing the idea of the “‘narrative self’ that links culture and mind, social and reflexive qualities” (14). Responding to the Europeanist critique of oral history’s supposed unreliability, he both makes frequent use of direct quotations from interviews (often including his own questions) and strives to present these interviews not as frozen snapshots of the past, but as a way to examine self-presentation.

In addition to its advancement of an analysis of gender in *cis*, straight, African men, *Making Men in Ghana* has certain thematic focuses that make it a unique and highly valuable contribution to the field. One is religion. As Miescher shows, the Kwawu region of Ghana has a particular religious history. Like in other parts of West Africa, Protestant missionaries arrived in Kwawu in the late Nineteenth Century. The group active in Kwawu, the Swiss-based Basel Mission, made gender roles a particular area of importance in ascribing how its growing membership of converts should live their daily lives. However, with the onset of World War I, the British expelled the German-affiliated Basel Mission and replaced it with a Scottish Presbyterian mission. Well into the second half of the Twentieth Century the influence of the Presbyterian Church would continue through the wide network of schools it operated in Kwawu. This history becomes crucial in understanding how three different religious traditions – the Basel Mission, the Presbyterian Church, and traditional Akan practice – affected varying paths to achieving masculinity and elderdom.

However, Miescher’s analysis is stunted by the conspicuous absence of one crucial element of social life: politics. Outside of some passing references to major political events, politics, especially nationalist politics, has almost no place in any of the eight individual

¹ Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

narratives of masculinity or in Miescher's evaluation of them. This is especially striking given not only that the immense upheaval of independence happened in the lifetime of all of the book's subjects, but also that there is a developed scholarly literature on the role that nationalist politics plays in the formation of masculine identities in Ghana. In particular, essays by Africanist Pashington Obeng and literary scholar Philip Holden discuss the significant ways in which nationalist politics during Ghanaian independence offered young Akan men paths to forging and negotiating their own masculine identities. The accounts are very different: while Obeng focuses on the formation of a socially-dependent, elder-revering, "traditional" masculinity by the "youngmen" (*nkwankwaa*) of the Asante nationalist National Liberation Movement (NLM) in the mid-1950's, Holden reads into Ghanaian independence leader Kwame Nkrumah's autobiography as an account of forging an individualistic, party and nation-state revering, elder-rejecting masculinity of a new Ghanaian nationalism. Yet, they both offer what Miescher does not: analyses into the powerful ways in which nationalist politics could be used to engage with masculine identity.

As described by Obeng, the National Liberation Movement, founded in 1954 by Asante nationalists who split off from Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP), became a means by which Asante youngmen could develop and assert their own masculine identity. In traditional Asante society (and Akan society more generally), political and social authority was held by elders, thus depriving youngmen – defined not just by age, but also by lower social status according to wealth, kinship, and religious hierarchies – of access to power, wealth, and what Obeng terms "senior masculinity."² Additionally, in the early 1950's these Asante youngmen found themselves cut out of the political and economic elite in Accra, dominated by a largely

² Pashington Obeng, "Gendered Nationalism: Forms of Masculinity in Modern Asante of Ghana," in *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*, ed. Lisa A. Lindsay and Stephan F. Miescher (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003), 193.

non-Asante CPP leadership. Thus, the young men who founded the NLM sought to define a very particular type of political authority by which they could challenge their individual lack of wealth, power, and masculine status within the “established powers” of Asante society, while also mobilizing Asante “senior masculinity” to support their movement.³

Specifically, the youngmen of the NLM sought to engage certain aspects of Asante “senior masculinity” to their advantage, even as they fought against much of its institutional hierarchy that had obstructed their social progress. This required an assertion of masculinity in a social context; that is, the approval and support of powerful and respected social allies beyond a mere mimicry of traditional Asante values.⁴ In other words, while the youngmen of the NLM sought to use Asante nationalist politics as a means of achieving “senior masculinity,” in order to legitimize their movement they also had to demonstrate to Asante powerbrokers that they deserved “senior masculinity.” Despite the eventual failure of the NLM to use traditional Asante notions of masculinity for nationalist political purposes (the party was dissolved following its defeat in the 1956 elections), the youngmen still vigorously engaged with ideas of masculine identity in the realm of national politics. This type of social and communal masculinity in the political sphere goes completely unacknowledged by Miescher and his interview partners.

In contrast, Phillip Holden’s analysis of Kwame Nkrumah’s autobiography, *Ghana*, shows another way in which politics and masculinity informed each other in the late years of colonial rule. In this case, political masculinity is achieved through the individual, rather than the collective. Much of Nkrumah’s autobiography focuses on presenting a series of dichotomies that reflect an individualized masculinity against a collective femininity: the disciplined party against the unruly mob, Ghanaian nationalism against “tribal” nationalisms, and the nation-state against

³ Obeng, “Gendered Nationalism,” 202.

⁴ Obeng, “Gendered Nationalism,” 202-3.

the colonial empire. Following the cue of his idol, Indian independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru, Nkrumah in *Ghana* is consciously trying to affirm the masculine “character” of the new Ghanaian nation against the feminine colonized subject.⁵ For example, he nearly omits all mentions to “chiefs,” the principle instruments of indirect rule, in his rural upbringing.⁶ This serves as part of Nkrumah’s project of separating a masculine pan-African nationalism from a political institution he saw as weak, supplicant, feminized arms of the British Empire.

While Nkrumah’s story is very different from that of the NLM youngmen, both crucially show that how nationalist politics could be used in 1950’s Ghana to create and negotiate masculine identities. Yet *Making Men in Ghana* makes it seem as if this lively history of masculine nationalism, a history directly experienced by any Ghanaian that could remember the independence period (including all eight of Miescher’s interview partners), is unimportant or irrelevant in a narrative of self-representations of masculinity. Interestingly, Miescher is not unaware of this literature: not only does he cite and is cited by Obeng, but Obeng’s essay appears in a collection that he co-edited. Thus, the answer to why *Making Men in Ghana* does not include politics in its framework of “competing masculinities” lies primarily in the reasons for Miescher’s individual sources not discussing them.⁷

Consequently, there are many potential reasons for Miescher’s political omission. For one, there is the fact that all eight of Miescher’s interview partners are respected elders in the community by the time Miescher interviews them and are thus inclined to tell their own life histories in a way that normalizes and legitimizes their paths to elderdom. To relate with the masculine politics of the youngmen of the NLM would be to legitimize a group that sought to

⁵ Philip Holden, *Autobiography and Decolonization: Modernity, Masculinity, and the Nation-State* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 118.

⁶ Holden, *Autobiography and Decolonization*, 127.

⁷ Obeng, “Gendered Nationalism,” 206.

coopt a “senior masculinity” that, traditionally, was not rightfully there’s; to discuss the experience of the Ghanaian masculinity that Nkrumah advocated in the 1950’s and 1960’s would give credence to an ideology that openly rejected the traditional “senior masculinity” that all eight elders had achieved. For these specific individuals, then, discussing the role of politics in shaping their masculine identity, from either of these poles, could easily be seen as tainting a path to respected elderdom through more acceptable categories in Kwawu society – the community, the church, the school, etc. Secondly, the public legacy of the independence movement, and nationalism in general, also has to be taken into account. When Miescher was conducting his interviews in the mid- and late-1990’s, Ghana’s president was Jerry Rawlings, who, as Mahmood Mamdani shows, actively sought to eliminate the lingering “customary” political power of “chiefs.”⁸ From the other end of the nationalist spectrum, the legacy of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana continues to be complicated, especially for those who remember the military coup that deposed him in 1966 and destroyed most of his legacy, from statues to political organizations. Thus, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Miescher’s informants may have been uneasy about discussing the still somewhat taboo issues of nationalism, particularly in the context of their personal experiences of masculinity. And thirdly, it is of course entirely possible that the eight particular men Miescher interviewed never really engaged in politics, or at least not in a way that could be meaningfully understood as relating to masculinity.

Although it cannot be denied from Obeng and Holden’s research that many Akan men did engage in politics as a realm of negotiating masculinity, the fact that these eight men did not creates the false impression that politics was simply unimportant in masculine identity creation in Ghana. Whatever the reason for Miescher’s sources neglecting to openly discuss themes of

⁸ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 214.

masculinity in the realm of politics, it still falls to Miescher himself to directly address these issues that are so integral to Ghana's political identity and mythology. Yet Miescher, while well aware of the literature on politics and masculinity, consciously neglects to do so. This is despite the fact that for other issues of masculinity underrepresented by his sources he frequently provides supplemental analysis and commentary bolstered by extensive archival research. Thus, Miescher's failure to sufficiently engage in ideas of political and nationalist masculinity represents a failure on his part to address one of the most crucial ways by which relatively young Akan men in the 1950's – being roughly the same age at the same time as Miescher's sources – seized a masculine identity. This absence dovetails with an apparent disinterest by Miescher and his interview partners, as Veit Arlt notes in his review, in discussing major historical events, such as World War II and Ghanaian independence.⁹ Thus, despite Miescher's excellent use of personal narratives in creating self-histories of masculine identity creation, he fundamentally fails to engage these narratives with the national social and political contexts upon which they and their sources crucially depend.

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Aaron Freedman graduated from Swarthmore College in 2014 with High Honors in History and Political Science. He hopes to continue his studies of 20th-century history in the future.

⁹ Veit Arlt, "Changing Constructions of Masculinity in Ghana: *Making Men in Ghana*. By Stephan F. Miescher," *The Journal of African History* 48.1 (2007): 160-1.